Telephone interview with World War II Navy nurse Sara Marcum Kelley, 14 April 1994 conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Mrs. Kelley had duty at Navy Base Hospital #12, Netley, Hants, England. (1921-2007)

Where were you from?

From Kentucky. I went for nurse's training in Huntington, WV. I lived up on a farm in Kentucky in a very rural area. Would you believe it's called Fluty Lick Branch? In order to go to high school, I had to live with my sister in Inez, a small town about 10 miles away but they didn't run any buses for kids to go to school. A friend of my sister's was in nurse's training and that's how I got interested in nursing. Money was pretty tight then.

I was in nursing training when the war came along in 1941. Everyone was really patriotic then. I called the Red Cross and asked if I could volunteer and they told me to complete my nurse's training first. In 1942 West Virginia would let you take the state board 3 months in advance because the war was going on. That's what our class did. So we were registered nurses before we were graduates.

I saw something in the paper about the Navy and my sister took me to Charleston, WV, to the recruiting station and I signed up. As soon as I graduated they told me they would let me know when to report for duty. I didn't graduate until January 30, 1943 so in February I got a letter telling me to report on or about February 1st to Bethesda. Not being familiar with military terminology, I thought they would tell me a final date. Shortly thereafter, I got a telegram wanting to know why I hadn't reported for duty. I got myself together and arrived at Bethesda on February 13th.

Bethesda really had beautiful nurses' quarters. We each had our own room. Miss Carver was chief nurse then. She went around with a yardstick and if she though your uniform dress was a little bit too short she'd make you get it fixed.

I stayed at Bethesda for about a year. They were going to send me to the corps school there to teach but I told the chief nurse that, being a new graduate, I didn't feel qualified to teach in the corps school and that I would rather take care of patients. Her name was Miss [Grace] Lally. She took me off the list and asked me if I wanted to go to foreign or sea duty and said I would. Then I got orders to report to Lido Beach in Long Island. Of course we didn't know where we were going. Jean Reichard, one of my friends from Bethesda, went with me.

We were at Lido Beach for a week or 10 days. It was real cold there. They had converted some of the hotels to shipping out points for people. It had been a resort but we were there in January when it was very cold. We went to England on the Aquitania. When we went aboard ship there was an Army band playing "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby."

At Lido Beach, you had been assigned to a medical unit.

Yes. It was called SNAG 56. CAPT C.J. Brown was the commanding officer. Aboard ship it was very crowded with six of us in a stateroom, 3 on either side. Only two of us could get dressed at a time. Then we had to go topside or the library, or someplace so the others could get dressed.

What was the crossing to England like?

We took the northern route unescorted because it was a fast ship. A few days out of Scotland, they spotted some unidentified planes and we had to stand by with abandon ship gear

on for some time. I heard one of the English sailors say that he hoped it didn't interfere with his tea time.

We landed at Gourock, Scotland and took a train to London. We were in London for 2 weeks temporary duty before we went down to Netley, Hants, to the hospital.

Where did you stay in London?

The Red Cross had facilities for us, and Mrs. Biddle, who was a member of the Philadelphia Biddles, was in charge of the Red Cross there. We didn't really do anything but go on tours.

Did you see a lot of the damage done by the Blitz?

Oh, yes. There were a lot of air raids.

Did you have to go to a shelter?

We were supposed to but we never did. I wasn't scared then. Now, I would probably be under a bed or a shelter. I never did go into an air raid shelter. I checked them out and they looked like a tomb or something. I thought that if I'm going to go, I'm going to go. It wasn't very good sense. While we were in London, we got a lot of publicity and they had some pictures in the paper of a couple of nurses that were really striking. The Army nurses called us Mrs. Biddle's debutantes.

Then we went down to the hospital at Netley. Would you believe it dated back to Queen Victoria's day? The grounds were beautiful outside the buildings, the surroundings and the view of the water. But the plumbing was atrocious. From the bathtubs and the sinks, the water drained into a trough that went halfway around the room before it finally went into a pipe and out.

It was a huge building, very very long.

The building was three stories and there was a corridor that ran the length of the front. When we had air raids the noise would vibrate back and forth. When we got the buzz bombs, it sounded like there was a bee going round and round.

So the old hospital was not in great condition.

No. The beds weren't the best in the world but we had to do the best we could. Each room had quite a few beds, perhaps 30 or so on either side. And down the end was a fireplace.

How many patients could you fit into a room?

Thirty or 35. But there were a whole bunch of rooms and they weren't connected, which is not very efficient when it comes to nursing because you would have to out into the main corridor and then around into the room. Usually you were just assigned to one room and then you would help out someplace else if you weren't busy.

Did you have to clean the place up when you first got there?

The Army had been there before us. We had to do some cleaning but not what you would expect. We took it over from the Army. They had a field hospital right in back of us. Even though our quarters weren't luxurious by any means with four of us in a room, the Army nurses had to live in tents.

You had bathrooms inside?

Yes. The Seabees came and put in showers and did some work on the nurses' quarters before we got there.

Where did you take your meals?

In the nurses' quarters. We had our own mess with our own cooks. We didn't eat with the patients. The kitchen for the patients was in the main building. They brought the food to the patients on carts.

What kind of food did you eat?

It seems to me that we had a lot of pork and we had brussels sprouts so often, it was a long time before I could eat them again.

What was a typical working day like at Netley?

Well, you worked shifts like you do at any hospital. It depended whether you were assigned the day duty, PMs, or night duty. I worked all three shifts. We usually did night duty for a month. The night duty began at 11 pm and ended at 7. You then tried to get some sleep. Days you worked from 7 to 3.
PMs were from 3 pm to 11.

For those first few months, you were preparing the hospital for D-Day?

Right. We did have patients before then but the place wasn't full.

Where were the operating rooms?

I never worked in the operating room so I can't tell you much about that. I know that when we got casualties, the surgery crew worked 24 hours a day. There was a railroad track right behind the hospital. We kept the patients for 24 to 48 hours and as soon as they could be moved, they were put on this hospital train and sent to the north part of England and we got ready for some more.

What did you do in your off-duty hours?

We could go into Southampton for dinner. There was a seafood restaurant not too far from the hospital. Miss [Martha M.] Heck, the chief nurse told us we had to double date.

Did you go out with the doctors?

No. We were surrounded by American fighter units and we were invited to their parties. I met a very nice lieutenant colonel who was all of 28.

It must have looked like of all southern England had been taken over by the Americans.

Yes, especially in the section where I was where there were more Americans than anything else.

Did you find the local English people friendly?

Yes. We had tea at the American Embassy in London and they had invited some of our British Navy counterparts--nurses. They were very friendly.

What was the chief nurse, Martha Heck, like?

She was nice, but very strict. I sometimes thought she slept with her uniform on because when I was on night duty and we'd have an air raid, she would be over there fully dressed in 5 minutes. Of course, the nurses' quarters was right adjacent to the hospital.

I have a photograph in front of me showing the nurses' air raid shelter. The caption says, "U.S. Navy nurses' air raid shelter adjoining Base Hospital #12. Chemical toilet on the left and benches on the right." Do you remember that?

I told you I went and looked at those air raid shelters and decided I wasn't going to go down there. We would turn our lights off in our rooms and watch the fireworks.

You mean you watched them bombing Southampton?

We were surrounded by ack ack guns which fired at enemy planes and the place really vibrated when they shot those guns. Of course, it made the patients real nervous. Some of them would get under their beds. But, as I said, I guess I didn't have sense enough to be afraid.

As June got closer, did you get a sense that the invasion was about to happen?

We could see all these ships out in the harbor getting ready to go. In fact, before the invasion, we were invited aboard ships several times for dinner. We had a pier that went out into the water and they would pick us up in those LCVPs [Landing Craft Vehicles and Personnel]. We were usually invited as a group for dinner. We really liked that because they had better food than we did. The day the invasion began, Eisenhower came on the hospital speaker telling us they had landed.

You saw the ships leaving for France and I guess you saw them coming back with casualties. What kind of ships brought them back?

All types of ships. The ships landed in Southampton because our pier could only handle small boats. They brought them by ambulance from Southampton which was 5 miles away.

What do you recall about the first casualties that came in?

A lot of them were in what they termed "shell shock." Some of them didn't know who we were. They thought we were Germans and they wouldn't tell us anything except their names and serial numbers. They were classified as mentally ill. Some of them were just farm boys and the shock of war was just too much for them.

Were they separated from the others and put in a special ward?

Yes.

You were treating mostly Army personnel?

Oh, yes. We had a few Navy but not many.

You must have had quite a crush of casualties those few days after D-Day. How long did this all last? Did it go on for days or weeks?

It went on for months until we left. I really don't know why the Navy sent us over there because we stayed less than a year before we turned the hospital back over to the Army.

Shortly after D-Day, the buzz bombs started coming over. What was that like?

It was weird. They sounded like big bumble bees going around up there and you never knew where they were going to hit. We were just lucky, I guess. Southampton was very badly damaged.

I have another picture here showing Admiral [Harold R.] Stark visiting the hospital.

Oh, I remember Admiral Stark's visit.

Where did you go after you left England?

I went to Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland for just a few months and then my mother became seriously ill and I requested to go back to the East Coast. They sent me to St. Albans Naval Hospital and I spent a year there and then I saw a notice on the bulletin board requesting nurses to go to physical therapy school because they couldn't hire enough physical therapists to take care of the wounded. I signed up for it and was one of the first they sent to the Medical College of Virginia in Richmond. There were 18 of us in our group and then there were 18 civilians. The Navy sent two other groups of 18 after that. After that I did physical therapy and not nursing any more.

When did you get out of the Navy?

I resigned from the Navy in May 1950. In the meantime I had gotten married. Between '43 and '46 if you got married, they automatically discharged you. But they were losing so many nurses that way that they changed the regulations. If you got married you could stay as long as you didn't become pregnant. If you got pregnant, then you were discharged. I got married in '48. I was supposed to stay for several more years to pay them back for sending me to school. My last duty station was at Mare Island here in Vallejo. My husband was a Marine officer. I met him at Mare Island. We bought a house here while I was still in the Navy so we just never left.